

eGoli, 2008: (re)mapping urban imaginaries

I have always been fascinated by the metropolis – the socio-political structures, the utilization of space with its discontinuities, the multiplicity of social forms and the interlaced boundaries within. One often forgets that the city, aside from physical paths and points of reference that can easily be depicted on graphical maps, also operates as a site of fantasy, desire, and imagination.

My research was concerned with revisiting our mental and topographical landscape. In doing so, I attempted to 'remap' physical and imaginary urban spaces through the medium of an art installation, as opposed to the conventional diagrammatic map. I feel that an installation has the potential to encompass issues such as personal memory, social tensions and history along with what is physical and tangible.

For this particular project, I chose Johannesburg, South Africa as a case study. Drawing from the rigorous documentation of memory and the past that permeates multiple levels of South Africa's post-apartheid psyche in their search for consolation, truth and justice, my goal was to produce an installation piece that responded to what is invisible in the city, aspects that Walter Benjamin's *flâneur* cannot experience on street wanderings, but that exist all the same. At this point I'd like to share a quote that propelled me into thinking about the city vertically, as opposed to laterally – a cross-section as opposed to a landscape:

One of the limits of classical theories of the metropolis hold that the most revelatory facets of modern metropolitan life lie on the surface, in the ephemeral and the visible... the case of Johannesburg clearly shows that one of the characteristic features of a metropolis is an underneath. As the name Egoli (City of Gold) indicates, this is a city born out of a ruthless, extractive, mining economy.

- Achille Mbembe, Sarah Nuttall, from "Writing the World from an African Metropolis"

One could argue that the metaphorical equivalent to the Parisian *flâneur* is the South African black migrant mine worker. In my work, I proposed a remapping of Johannesburg that is not geographically focused, but that portrays a city of the imagination; the city as a site of radical uncertainty, unpredictability, inequality and insecurity, with its origins emanating four kilometers underground. I allude to the intricacies of the metropolis and not just the physical aspects of it, with the intention of adopting the poetic tone of Italo Calvino's book, *Invisible Cities*, within a visual language. By presenting issues that are not necessarily attractive as something beautiful and seductive, my objective was to provoke the curiosity of the viewer and to lead them to question their preconceptions of cities. I thought that perhaps a sculptural map that operates on such an allegorical level can free the viewer's imagination, and hence reveal much more about the city than what is seen on the surface.